

## **The Effect of Hookup Culture on the Student Experience**

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College is a transformative experience in all aspects of life, including exploring sexual identities and preferences. Understanding the environments and ways in which students are experiencing their sexuality is crucial for higher education and student affairs practitioners. Acknowledging the existence and prominence of hookup culture on campuses allows institutions to provide tailored educational programs that focus on mitigating the risks involved in hookup culture and equipping our students with the tools for sexual health. This method creates a safer experience for all students, which promotes a healthier campus environment. Hookup culture is a modern phenomenon (Wade, 2017), which Duval (2020) defines hookup culture as “a culture that is dominated by attitudes and beliefs that ultimately prescribe casual sexual encounters with friends or acquaintances” (568).

The sexual behaviors of college students are a contemporary higher education and student affairs professional issue because the student’s experiences extend beyond the classroom. As practitioners, we must use a holistic, empathetic lens to gain insight into each student’s experiences and find new methods of supporting them. We can’t afford to turn a blind eye to the realities of modern college life and the experience of the students we support. Understanding and educating students about sexual preferences, identities, and consent create a sexually positive and safe campus culture (Astle et al., 2021; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). The impact of a sexually positive campus community fosters inclusivity and respect amongst college students, thus enhancing the overall collegiate experience. We would be remiss if we did not consider the challenges dating and romantic relationships present in student development. A deeper understanding of the effect of hook-up culture and casual dating will allow student support services and programs to improve. Title IX offices, sexual harassment prevention training, and

programs centered around consent must consider the reality of the modern dating experience and the proliferation of dating apps on college campuses. This pedagogy will allow practitioners to empower students to make healthy decisions while acknowledging the reality of current campus climates and working to end the stigma and judgment within campus communities.

The topic of hookup culture and students' sexual behavior is very nuanced. With any social group, intersectionality exists. The lived experience of one student will look different compared to a student of a divergent background. Due to the robustness of this topic, this paper will focus on three topic areas. We will examine how hookup culture impacts student well-being, the connection between hookup culture and Greek Life, and the implication hookup culture and casual dating have on sexual assault on college campuses.

### **Student Well-being**

The prevalence of casual sex and hook up culture on college campuses must be taken into consideration when examining student well-being. Students are emerging adults and it is naive to discount how dating or sexual experiences shape their identity. The nature of hookup culture and casual dating is often short term and fleeting, which can have different implications for student well-being. Vrangalova (2015) conducted a survey measuring hookups with four well-being indicators; depression, anxiety, life satisfaction, and self-esteem amongst a university-wide sample of Northeastern U.S. freshmen and juniors. Findings indicate that hookups were associated with higher well-being for women and lower well-being for men (Vrangalova, 2015, p. 485). Vrangalova found "Across all 96 regressions, statistically significant associations between well-being and hookups were infrequent (23%), predominantly confined to anxiety and life satisfaction, equally likely in the direction of higher (13%) as lower (10%) well-being, and

affected by both casual relationship length and intimacy level” (p. 485). These findings suggest that hookups were less predictive of student well-being than measurements to life satisfaction, and the association between well-being and hookups differed across women and men.

Bersamin et al. (2014) multiethnic sample of heterosexual, emerging-adult college students aged from 18 to 25, from 30 institutions across the U.S. found that casual sex was associated with psychological distress and lower levels of psychological well-being (p. 50). Results showed students who had recently engaged in casual sex reported lower levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction compared to students who didn’t have sex the past 30 days (Bersamin et al., 2014, p. 48). As it is an ongoing investigation of how hook ups and wellness impact each other, the motivations behind hookup behavior are just as important.

Vrangalova (2014) longitudinal investigation on the role of casual sex on college student’s well-being uses the self-determination theory (SDT) as a framework to hypothesize that level of motivation for hooking up shapes the impact of well-being after the experience (p. 945). A university wide sample of 528 undergraduates at Cornell results indicate, “...not all hookups have the same potential to benefit or harm well-being and not all individuals are equally susceptible to this potential; instead, this depends on many individual, social, and situational factors” (Vrangalova, 2014, p.956). Greater understanding of the relationship between student well-being and motivation in hook ups can inform educators on messages regarding casual sex health practices, and intentional sexual interactions.

### **Students’ Sexual Health Behaviors and Communication**

Oswalt et al. (2013) national study on sexual health behaviors and sexual orientation in U.S. college students found a correlation between sexual behavior and sexual orientation. Oswalt et al. (2013) differs from other national studies as it is the first to include people that are

identified as unsure in their findings. Oswalt et al. (2013) discovers, “unsure men having significantly more partners than gay, bisexual and heterosexual men and heterosexual men having significantly less partners than gay, bisexual and unsure men. Bisexual women had significantly more partners than females reporting other sexual orientations” (p. 1561) . This inclusion is crucial as it demonstrates that heteronormative sexual health programming only serves a small population of active sexual college students. In order to ensure college students are partaking in safe sexual behaviors, resources must be inclusive of all sexual differences.

Edison et al.(2022) found that self-reported sexual communication styles around consent, and sexual health differs across gender and race/ethnicity in college students. Results found, “females reported higher self-efficacy to obtain consent than males, but lower odds of communication about condom use and HIV prevention. Black and other race students reported higher odds of HIV/sexually transmitted infection prevention communication than white students” (Edison et al, 2022, p. 282). Approaches to sexual health communication and behavior is shaped by gender, race/ethnicity, and STI history. Sexual assault prevention education needs to go beyond obtaining consent by enhancing sexual health communication to promote overall sexual health (Edison et al., 2022). By improving sexual education, it provides student autonomy in their sexual well-being and the skillset to have sexual communication with their peers.

### **Institutional Responsibility on Students’ Sexual Well-being**

It is an institutional responsibility to provide students the resources and education necessary to be autonomous in their sexual health as hook up culture is prevalent on college campuses. The student perception of the extent to which it is an institutional responsibility to inform college students for sexual health resources varies based on institution type (Lechner, et al., 2013). Students from 2-year institutions expect referrals to resources while 4-year institutions

expect resources along with a supportive community (Lechner et al., 2013, p. 28). It is important to note that 2-year colleges tend to have limited offerings and funding in their services when compared to 4-year colleges that have full healthcare services. This difference suggests that 2-year colleges should connect students with community resources rather than campus resources to support their sexual health needs (Lencher et al., 2013, p.33). Specific to 4-year participants was, “the role of college as offering resources and support and empowering students to decide for themselves if and how to access those resources' ' (Lencher et al., 2013, p.31). The expectation of institutional resources on sexual health in 4-year students require colleges to not only provide resources, but emotional support from their campus community. It is crucial that institutions prioritize student sexual well-being as it is an essential component in an emerging adult’s development.

Although there is limited research, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic heavily shaped the well-being of college students. Firkey et al. (2020) online study on student well-being between May - July 2020 found that college students self-reported, “ ...a decrease in quality of life and increase in anxiety, both of which are expected given the widespread economic and social effects of the pandemic" (p.5). The pandemic impacted sexual behavior amongst college students as, “Most students reported a decrease in opportunities to have sex (55.2%) and in frequency of sexual activity (57.5%), yet use of dating apps remained unchanged (50.9%)” (Firkey et al., 2020, p. 4). Despite being on lock down, the use of dating apps amongst college students did not change. This indicates that even though the pandemic restricted sexual encounters, the pursuit to find a partner on an app remained unchanged. College campuses can no longer shy away from the sexual health of their students, and have an obligation to support students’ post-pandemic sexual health. Programming and resources need to inform students of healthy sexual

communication in-person and on apps, and understand what challenges arise in a post-pandemic hookup culture.

### **Parties, Greek Life, and Hookup Culture**

The student experience extends beyond the classroom. While academics are a crucial component of student development and success, the same can be said for students' organizational affiliations and the role they play in their social development, norms, and behaviors. In keeping with this philosophy, it becomes easier to analyze behavioral phenomena, like hook-up culture, who is engaging in this behavior, where it is happening, and its consequences.

Hookup culture being a social norm is relatively contemporary for today's society both within and outside of higher education. Due its infancy, student affairs practitioners have taken a particular interest in where this sexual behavior is occurring and the factors students consider when engaging in a hook up.

### **Alcohol Consumption and Sexual Behavior**

Through this pursuit, studies indicate that hooking up is more likely to occur within the social settings of parties where alcohol consumption and drug use are also present (Stinson, 2010; Hayes & Boyle, 2021, p. 1143). Binge drinking is the consumption of 5 or more drinks for men and 4 or more drinks for women on a singular occasion (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2022, para. 2)). Approximately 40% of college students have reported engaging in this type of behavior which is significantly higher than non-college attending people (Gibson & Vassalotti, 2017, p. 64 ;Wechsler, 2002, p. 207). Studies indicate that 64% of students who have engaged in a hookup were under the influence of alcohol, most consuming three or more drinks (Fielder & Carey, 2010, para. 1). For some students, binge drinking creates the

sensation of *liquid courage* which lowers their inhibitions and allows them to do things they normally would not (Gibson & Vassalloti, 2017, p. 70; Hayes & Boyles, 2021, p. 1146). For these students, alcohol can operate “both as a motive to pursue a sexual activity, as well as an excuse” (Hayes & Boyle, 2021, p. 1155).

Due to alcohol and drugs playing a significant role on hookup culture for college students, student affairs practitioners must equip themselves and their students with knowledge regarding the role these drugs play in consensual sexual activity. The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) state that consent *cannot* be given if one or all of the individuals involved in the sexual act are incapacitated (by way of drugs or alcohol) (RAINN, 2022, para. 8). Understanding the role that alcohol plays in sexual behavior is crucial to equipping students with the appropriate knowledge surrounding consensual and non-consensual sexual behaviors. By definition hookups are consensual but some of the settings where these hookups occur can contribute to non-consensual acts.

### **Alcohol and Drug Use, Parties, and Sexual Behavior**

Understanding the role alcohol has within hook-up culture is important, but understanding the social settings where students are heavily consuming alcohol is also critical information. Alcohol consumption can occur within several spaces on campus for college students, but none is more prevalent than parties. Parties themselves are not inherently bad nor do they always involve alcohol or other drugs. They can offer the opportunity for students to connect and increase their social network, but they also create situations where hookups can occur the most. Parties and being a “partier” can serve as a status symbol for students on their campuses, especially for those who attend a higher education institution with the reputation of being a “party school” (Stinson, 2010, p. 101). Studies have indicated that a student's alcohol



consumption and their “hookup” come from an initial interaction at a party, specifically those thrown by members of the Greek community on their campus (Flack, et. al., 2007; see also Stoner, et. al, 2007, Brown, et. al. 2016).

### **Fraternity and Sorority Life, Alcohol Consumption, and Sexual Behavior**

Fraternity and Sorority Life, also known as Greek Life, can range from being a significant part of a higher education institution’s culture to non-existent for students. Fraternities and sororities can enact positive change regarding campus climate and have a positive impact on the surrounding communities in which they operate. Typically, colleges and universities that have the reputation of being a “party school” also tend to have a large Greek life presence. For example, the University of Alabama, Florida State University, and Indiana University, to name a few, are all known as party schools that have a large Greek life presence. Fraternities and sororities can also host parties where their attendees can engage in risky sexual behavior, dangerous levels of alcohol consumption, and drug use. It has been previously established that a large majority of hookups occur while being under the influence of alcohol, drugs, or both at parties.

When thinking about student populations that host the most social gatherings and parties, practitioners need to include Greek life in the conversation. Due to the gender norms integrated into the fibers of these organizations, these groups might participate in an increased number of sexual partners, alcohol consumption, and sexual aggression compared to non-affiliated members of their institutions (Boswell et. al., 1996, Harris & Schmalz, 2016, Scott-Sheldon, et. al. 2008) Additionally, “participation in party culture, Greek life, and hooking up... [contribute] to a heightened risk of perpetrating sexual aggression and being sexually victimized” (Hayes & Boyle, 2021, p. 1146) With Greek affiliated members and having increased access to alcohol

consumption, equipping this student population with the tools to make legal, healthy, and safe decisions is critical to the work of student affairs practitioners.

When thinking about the implications of hookup culture for the well-being of students, student affairs practitioners must be knowledgeable about who their “at risk” students are and who are the students more likely to engage in hookup culture (Hayes & Boyle, 2021, p. 1146). Several studies have indicated that students who belong to higher education institutions that have the reputation of being a “party school”, affiliated with Greek life, and consume alcohol or use drugs at higher rates compared to the student population are the students who have an increased likelihood of “hooking-up”. Equipping student affairs practitioners with this knowledge can tailor information and programming for our “at-risk” students. Touchpoints can be made with specifically campus partners to properly educate those students on the risks associated with hookups, binge drinking, and drug use, and the implications of safe practices for all three. Educating students in understanding that consent cannot be given in conjunction with drug and alcohol use is very important in mitigating unwanted sexual encounters between students.

### **Sexual Assault and Hookup Culture**

Although there are certainly many risk factors associated with the prevalence of hookup culture and casual dating on campuses, a key aspect in the definition of both hookup culture and in casual dating is the presence of consent between all parties involved. Sexual violence is separate from casual dating, and is defined as “penetrative or nonpenetrative abusive sexual contacts, which occur without the consent of the victim or when the victim refuses or is unable to give a consent due to intoxication or illness, using verbal or physical coercion” (Bhochhibhoya et al., 2021).

Though they are not synonymous, hookup culture and sexual violence are connected on college campuses. Multiple studies have found evidence that students who participate in hookup culture are significantly more likely to experience sexual assault (Flack et al., 2008; Tyler et al., 2017; Bhochhibhoya et al., 2021). One of these studies found that out of 55 reported instances of attempted rape, 47 (85.5%) of those instances took place during a “hook up” encounter; in 21 reported instances of completed rape in the same study, 19 (90.5%) took place during a hookup (Flack et al, 2008). This statistic of increased rates of sexual violence is especially concerning given that an estimated 60% or more of students will engage in one or more hookup encounters during their time in college (Duval, 2020, p. 569).

The rates of reported sexual assaults vary greatly across college campuses, with estimates that 20-25% of college women will experience attempted or completed rape during their undergraduate years (Duval, 2020, p. 568). This is a nationwide average, and the rates at each campus are vastly different- some campuses have much higher reported rates, while others, such as Stanford, are significantly lower, with only 4.7% of women at Stanford reporting sexual assault during their undergraduate years (Duval, 2020, p. 568). Differences in campus culture is one significant factor that contributes to this vast disparity in sexual assault prevalence across campuses, with the campus climate around hookup culture making up one significant aspect of this overall campus culture.

### **Sexual Assault Risk Factors in Hookup Culture**

One of the hallmarks of hookup culture as defined in a broad survey of undergraduate students is its ambiguity (Hardesty, 2021, p. 1122). Students interviewed largely expressed a distaste for direct communication about sex in hookup situations; one student in particular directly discussed this ambiguity, stating that “people in general can push their boundaries,

pressure someone into having sex which is a lot more different than sex from someone being like, ‘Yes I want to have sex. Let’s do this.’” (Hardesty, 2021, p. 1123). Another issue pertaining to ambiguity in hookup culture is ambiguity in what exactly a hookup entails. There was no clear consensus among the interviewees about what a hookup constituted, with answers ranging from “making out” to sexual intercourse (Hardesty, 2021, p. 1122). Alongside the lack of clear communications, this ambiguity in the term itself leaves more room for sexual violence to occur: two students could consent to hookup without consensus on what that entails.

Casual dating and hookups are often thought of as occurring between strangers, with connections facilitated via use of dating apps or parties. However, one study found that the majority of sexual assaults occurring in encounters deemed “hookups” were perpetrated by either an acquaintance or a former romantic partner (Duval, 2020, p. 579). This knowledge is essential in shifting our understanding of encounters in which sexual assault may occur as well as in considering how campus partners approach sexual violence prevention and awareness among students. Additionally, victims of sexual violence are more likely to blame themselves for instances of assault or rape in hookups between friends, acquaintances, and former romantic partners (Duval, 2020, p. 569). This, along with stigmas around hookups and casual dating, may adversely affect reporting of sexual assault to Title IX offices or other resources on campus.

### **Rape Myths and Hookup Culture**

In 2017, Reling et al. published their research on the connection between rape myth<sup>1</sup> acceptance on campus and hookup culture on campuses. They found that endorsement of prevalence of hookup culture on campus was the leading factor in the acceptance of rape myths (Reling et al., 2017, 501). Other factors that impacted the prominence of rape myth acceptance

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<sup>1</sup> Rape myths are defined as “false beliefs, stereotypes, and (negative/positive) prejudicial thoughts people hold toward rape survivors/offenders” (Reling et al., 2017, 502)

were gender and religion (Reling et al., 2017, 501). Hookup culture on campus generally reinforces rape myths through endorsing and affirming the role of men as sexual initiators who are at the mercy of their sexual drives, while women are seen as “asking for it” based on their clothing choices, behavior, and passivity (Reling et al., 2017, 503). Sexual assault occurrences also increase based on locations associated with hookups, such as residence halls, off-campus student housing, and fraternity houses (Reling et al., 2017, 503).

Hookup culture on campuses can take different forms, each with unique effects on sexual assault and rape myth prevalence. Reling et al. found that while a campus culture that promoted the belief that “hookups are harmless and elevate social status” led to an increase in acceptance of rape myths, the belief that “hookups express sexual freedom” actually led to a decrease in acceptance of rape myths (2017, 501). This finding demonstrates that the narrative around hookup culture on college campuses is as important, if not more so, than the existence of hookup culture itself. While the connections between the presence of hookup culture and sexual assault are highly concerning, it is also unrealistic for student affairs professionals to aim to eliminate hookup culture entirely on campuses, and in fact attempting to do so could result in more harm by cutting off students engaging in hookup culture from campus resources such as health services or Title IX offices.

Hookup culture on college campuses doesn’t seem to be going anywhere anytime soon, and unfortunately neither does sexual assault. The research into the connection between the two does reveal some potential approaches that colleges can take towards hookup culture for harm reduction. By focusing on changing the narrative around hookup culture towards an expression of sexuality and sexual freedom rather than an expression of power and social capital, institutions can work to dispel harmful rape myths on campuses. Additionally, highlighting the

importance of communication in hookups and reinforcing what consent means may help to mitigate sexual assault that occurs as a result of the lack of communication ingrained in hookup culture. Understanding the range of relationships (friends, acquaintances, strangers, etc) between people who are engaging in hookups can help institutions provide better support to people who experience sexual assault during hookup encounters. Finally, there is a need for more research around differences in campus culture across institutions, especially as it pertains to campus hookup culture, since rates of sexual assault are so variable at different institutions, and a greater understanding of the differences between these schools may help institutions mitigate sexual violence on their own campuses.

### **Implications**

Student affairs practitioners have a vital role to play in college students' experience on a daily basis. The role that practitioners play will look different depending on their position and relationship with the students they work with, but supporting the student experience is at the heart of every student affairs role. When 40% of college students are engaging in hookup culture behavior, it becomes very likely that it will impact practitioners' roles in some capacity (Gibson & Vassalotti, 2017, p. 64 ;Wechsler, 2002, p. 207). Thus, learning the implications of hookup culture and strategies to better support these experiences becomes a part of the practitioners' ever-expanding toolbox.

The implications of hookup culture on college campuses extend into almost every office on college campuses, despite the fact that hookup culture largely occurs outside of the scope of most student affairs practitioners. Title IX offices are a key area in which student affairs practitioners must be prepared to support students. As hookup culture and higher rates of sexual

assault are connected, it is essential that student affairs practitioners working in Title IX offices, women's centers, or victim support offices on campus are prepared to support students who experience sexual assault, sexual harassment, or rape when engaging in hookup culture without judgement or prejudice. Fraternity and sorority life offices are also a key place where education and harm prevention in hookup culture can occur, due to the connection between fraternity and sorority life, alcohol use, and hookup culture. Residential life offices must be equipped to engage in conversations around hookup culture with students, as they manage the spaces where many of the hookups may occur and often are on the front lines of incidents that happen within the residence halls. Finally, academic support personnel such as advisors and deans should be prepared to support students who may experience academic challenges as a result of hookup encounters or resulting assaults. A student who experiences harm as a result of sexual assault during a hookup encounter may turn to any trusted adult for support, and as such it is important that all student affairs practitioners are prepared to respond appropriately, supportively, and without judgement or blame towards the student for engaging in hookup culture.

When thinking about the implications of hookup culture for the well-being of students, student affairs practitioners must be knowledgeable about who their "at risk" students are and who are the students more likely to engage in hookup culture (Hayes & Boyle, 2021, p. 1146). Several studies have indicated that students who belong to higher education institutions that have the reputation of being a "party school", affiliated with Greek life, and consume alcohol or use drugs at higher rates compared to the student population are the students who have an increased likelihood of "hooking-up". Equipping student affairs practitioners with this knowledge can tailor information and programming for our "at-risk" students. Touchpoints can be made with specifically campus partners to properly educate those students on the risks associated with

hookups, binge drinking, and drug use, and the implications of safe practices for all three.

Educating students in understanding that consent cannot be given in conjunction with drug and alcohol use is very important in mitigating unwanted sexual encounters between students.

Student affairs practitioners and anyone in a role that supports college-aged students should also recognize the fact that students often participate in these activities and behaviors without a foundational knowledge of consent or safe sex behaviors. According to data collected by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) discussed in an article by Wilimitis (2021), there are only seven states that have mandated sexual education, HIV and STI education, and a comprehensive education over healthy relationships. There are 30 states that mandate only sex education and 37 that only mandate HIV and STI education. Nine states have mandated consent education, but only California requires comprehensive education that covers sex ed, STI education, healthy relationship education, and covers consent (Wilimitis, 2021). For practitioners, understanding that they do not necessarily have the foundational knowledge from comprehensive education in their K-12 journey requires approaching situations with an open mind. Much like when a new student walks through the door in general, the first step is learning what they know, figuring out what happened, and moving to what support can be provided.

Practitioners interested in better supporting their students with regard to their experiences with hookup culture can start listening and learning about their environment. They can do this by exploring the campus culture of the university they are on and developing an understanding of student behavior with alcohol, casual dating, and the support systems that are at both the institutional level and within the student body's culture with each other. A study by Museus et al. (2022) found that campus cultures that were more culturally engaging and holistically supportive



of student learning and growth had higher levels of academic success and persistence.

Discovering the existing campus culture structures and the ways in which students interact with each other and the institution can give practitioners a better understanding of where to start.

Practitioners can also listen to what the students want. Assessment is an underutilized resource within the field, but surveying students to see what they can identify as gaps in programming and institutional support provides a better understanding of what practitioners can do to better support them. Previous research indicates that most students are looking for increased inclusivity with regard to sexual health education for LGBTQIA+ students, more education on healthy relationships and intimate partner violence, up-to-date and realistic information about sex, and more education opportunities on a more regular and frequent basis (Astle et al., 2021; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). An in-depth literature review of 30 years worth of research about sex education found that, “Attention to the full range of sexual health topics, scaffolded across grades, embedded in supportive school environments and across subject areas, has the potential to improve sexual, social, and emotional health and academic outcomes for young people” (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021, p.13).

The overarching theme for student affairs practitioners to better support their students is to continuously learn about what students are doing. Understanding the relationship between alcohol and sexual behaviors, how hookup culture and sexual assault sometimes – but not always – are connected, the impact that casual sex has on holistic student wellbeing, and the other factors discussed in this paper can better situate practitioners to support students. Finding out what the campus culture is and what is happening on the specific campus that they work on will help as well.

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